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ABSTRACT

Interviews with 265 low-income women examined demographic factors, maternal and child educational experiences, and social support factors, with a focus on urban-rural differences. The women lived in Kansas, Tennessee, Texas, and Florida, and ranged in age from 16 to 55; 94 percent had children and 80 percent were not currently married. The results show that rural poor women were more likely to be married or divorced while the majority of urban women were never married; almost twice as many rural as urban women had families of four or more children; rural women reported receiving welfare longer than urban women; rural respondents were generally older; and urban women had more education but were employed less than rural women. The most important findings that relate to special education personnel are: (1) poor mothers did not get involved in school activities, probably because of discomfort with teachers and lack of social support rather than because of attitudes toward school, which were positive; (2) poor families had more children with special needs, which, added to the stress and pressures of poverty, may prevent school involvement; and (3) lack of social support was a big factor in the lives of poor women. Schools that aim to be supportive of parents and involve parents in their children's education need to consider that lack of support can be a major barrier for parents. (Contains 12 references.) (TD)

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A TOUGH ROW TO HOE: RESEARCH ON EDUCATION AND RURAL POOR FAMILIES

Special education professionals are especially concerned with the relationship of education and poverty. The relationship between poverty and development is well documented (Huston, McLoyd, & Coll, 1994). The current political climate with its concerns for budget restraints has focused on reforming entitlement services for the poor (called welfare reform). For those children who are at risk for disabling conditions, increased poverty rates and decreased entitled services means that there will be more children in need of special education. It also means that poor families will have more severe economic needs and thus may possibly be more difficult to involve in their children's education.

Even with the "best case scenario" of welfare reform and it's objectives and outcomes, the amount of economic support for poor families will be reduced and single parents will be expected to enter the work force (Strawn, 1992). There is another reason for concern about poverty rates. Despite popular opinion, employment does not assure that a family escapes poverty. Real wages (wages adjusted for inflation) have been declining for American workers since 1973 (Center on Hunger, Poverty, and Nutrition Policy, 1995). The Census Bureau found that economic factors such as low-wage jobs accounted for approximately 85% of the child poverty rate in 1988 (Hernandez & Myers, 1993). In rural areas, human capitol factors account for some of the discrepancy between wages in rural and metropolitan areas. These factors include higher drop out rates, lower college completion, and less employment experience. However rural employers do not reward education and experience at the same rate as urban employers. About two-thirds of the earnings gap between rural and urban men is due to the fact that education and experience command fewer dollars in rural areas than in metropolitan regions (Dudenhefer, 1994).

In 1990 there were 9 million rural poor persons out of a total rural population of 56 million. The rural poverty rate in 1990 was 16.3 percent, the rate for suburban areas was 8.7 and the poverty rate in inner cities was 19.0 percent. Families in rural areas are chronically poorer that their metropolitan counterparts and there are fewer opportunities for employment which provides wages that put a family above the poverty level (Dudenhefer, 1994). In addition, poor families in rural areas are more persistently poor and there are fewer resources for help in rural areas (Rural Sociological Society Task Force on Persistent Rural Poverty, 1993). Thus children of poor families in rural areas are at special risk in developmental problems, and changes in policies and programs in the current welfare reform plans will increase these risks.

Special educators and others who work with children and families need

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adequate information about the characteristics of poor families. Working with families to reduce poverty levels and to reduce risk factors for healthy child development is a task that is often complicated by misinformation, lack of information, and prevailing stereotypes of low-income and mother-only families. In addition, there are some distinct differences between economically poor families in rural areas compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

To develop appropriate programs and to make policies that do not exacerbate problems already faced by poor families, accurate information is needed. Programs and interactions based on stereotypes will not alleviate poverty, improve developmental outcomes of children, or involve parents in the education of their children (Bianchi, 1993; Hanson & Carta, 1996). The purpose of this study is the collect and examine data from mothers in poor families and compare the results to prevailing stereotypes and assumptions about poor families, especially with a focus on urban - rural differences.

This study endeavored to obtain accurate information about characteristics, attitudes, and education and employment history of low-income mothers and to analyze differences between metropolitan and non metropolitan areas. The results provide information which can be used by policy makers and educators concerned with poor families. Specific suggestions for rural special educators are discussed.

METHOD

Subjects and Settings.

This study involved 265 economically poor families, most of whom are AFDC recipients and most of whom are single mothers. The subjects were all referred to an agency which serves low-income families, such as JTPA, Adult Basic Education, community colleges, and state welfare agencies. All subjects were asked by their teacher or case manager if they would agree to participate in the study and to sign an informed consent.

The participants of the study were from 4 states: Kansas (9.9%), Tennessee (38.0%), Texas (46.8%), and Florida (5.3%). U.S. Census Bureau definitions of metropolitan and non-metropolitan were used to delineate rural and non-rural. Non metropolitan is defined as counties in which the largest city contains less than 50,000 people and the inhabitants do not commute to an urban center. Metropolitan areas were in Texas and Kansas, and non-metropolitan areas were Texas, Tennessee, and Florida. Using this definition, 137 participants were from rural areas and 128 were lived in non-rural areas. Seventy-three percent of those who responded to a question about where they lived said they lived in the country or in a town, as opposed to a city.

Age. Ages of participants ranged from 16 - 55. Fourteen percent were twenty years of age or younger, 43.7% were 21-30 years, 29.6 were 31 - 40 years, and 10% were 41 - 50 years. Three women, or 2.7% were over fifty years of age. The mean age was 29.6 years with the median at 28 and the mode at 24.

Children. The 265 participants had a total of 630 children, with an average of 2.38 children each. Both the median and the mode were 2. Six percent reported having no children. Eighty-four women had two children (31.0%) which was the largest group. The second most common size was one child (22.4%) followed closely by three children (21.3%). Eleven percent had four children and five mothers each had five and six children. Seven mothers had seven children and one reported having eight children.

Marital status. About 20% of the women were married and 37.6% were never married. Thirty-seven percent were divorced or separated and four of the women reported being widowed and ten reported they were living with a significant other (undefined).

Education. The average grade completed by the participants of this study was 11.0, or less than high school. Eighty had a high school diploma and 47 reported completing a GED. Ninth, tenth, and eighth grades were the next most common completed, with 29, 28, and 20, respectively.

AFDC status. Two hundred one respondents were currently receiving AFDC. Of those, 42.4% had been on AFDC for one year or less, 36.8% for one to three years, 16.9% for four to five years and 14.4% from five to ten years. Fifteen mothers had been receiving AFDC payments for over ten years. The mean years on AFDC was 1.8 years, with 2 as both the median and the mode.

Ethnicity. When answering the question about their ethnicity, eight women checked the line indicating none and 28 marked other without specifying. Twenty-eight (12.3%) indicated Hispanic, 39.2% were Black, 8.3% were Native American, 40% marked Anglo. One was Asian. The researchers hypothesize that the 28 who marked "other" were Anglo because they were all on one group from rural north central Tennessee.

Employment status. Of the participants in this study, 87.1 percent were unemployed and 12.9 percent reported they were working.

Measurement.

Demographic data. The researchers constructed a demographic data form which was completed by all respondents. It required both interpretive answers to questions (such as "If your child is receiving special education services, do you feel he/she is benefiting and why or why not?") and questions with choices (such as grade level completed). The demographic form included information about the educational history of the mother and her children and the mother's employment history. Specific questions about the mother's interactions with her children's teachers were also asked.

The Support Functions Scale (Dunst, Trivette, and Deal, 1988) was used to measure parents' self-reported needs for different types of help and assistance. To develop the scale, extensive interviews were conducted with parents of preschool-

aged children. They were asked to identify all the things that others did that they found helpful and supportive. The responses and resources that were most frequently named were selected as scale items. These items were placed on a five-point scale ranging from (1) as *never* need this type of support, to (5) as *quite often* need this type of support. There is an extended version of the scale which includes 20 scale items and a short-form version with 12 items, where the items were based on the factor analysis of the extended version. The scale identifies five support factors: emotional, child, financial, instrumental, and agency. For this study, the short form was used. .

Procedure.

All participants were interviewed briefly and asked to read and complete a package of measurement instruments. Most sessions were done in small groups, however some were done individually. If requested, instruments could have been administered in a different language. No native language packages were requested. All sessions were conducted face to face and took from 60 - 90 minutes. Each of the twenty interviewers, staff at cooperating agencies, were present during their respective sessions and were allowed to read items or words upon request but were not allowed to interpret the questions.

RESULTS

Frequency counts were used to tabulate information gathered about the participants of the study and to assess their responses to the questions in the self-esteem and the social support measures. These results were then divided by rural and non-rural categories as described above. Thus, for each measure, results were a total number and percent of the whole as well as rural and non-rural subdivisions,

The results of the study include (a) description of the families in the study in terms of demographic differences between rural and non-rural residents; (b) a description of perceived social support in terms of rural and non-rural residents; and (c) a description of rural and non-rural comparisons of the education and special needs of mothers and children in the study.

Demographics.

The study participants in rural areas were generally older that their urban counterparts. Of the metro mothers, 35.2% were 21 - 25, 18% were 16 - 20; 12.5% were 31 - 35 and 11.7% were 36 - 40 and 26 - 30. More of the nonmetro mothers were 26 - 30 years old (25.5%), and 17.5% were 31- 35; 16.8% were 36 - 40; and 13.9% were 21- 25. Nearly 19% of the urban mothers were 20 or younger compared to 10% of the rural mothers.

More of the rural women were married, 27% compared to 12.5%. Fifty-two percent of the metro mothers were never married, compared to 23.4% of the rural women. Almost twice as many of the rural women were divorced.

Rural mothers had more children. The highest frequency for rural and non-rural families was 2 children (32% nonrural, 31.4% rural), but 30% of the non-rural families had one child and only 15% of the rural families had one child. Twenty-two percent of the non-rural families had 3 children and 21% of rural families had 3 children. For families with 4 or more children, 12.5% of nonrural and 23% of rural families fit this category.

When asked about employment, 16.4% of nonrural and 10.2% of rural women said they were employed.

Of those who responded to the question about how long were they receiving AFDC payments, 27.6% or urban and 10.7% of rural participants had been receiving AFDC for less than one year. Four percent of urban compared to 16.5% of rural mothers had been receiving payments for more than 10 years. The highest frequency for metro participants was 1 - 3 years (41.2%) and for those in rural areas, it was 4 - 5 years (32%).

Social support.

Scores on the 5 factors of social support (emotional, financial, child, instrumental and agency), range from 1(never) to 5 (quite often). Rural mothers reported slightly more emotional, financial, and agency support. Urban mothers reported more support in the areas of child support and instrumental support. Emotional support was 3.2 for rural and 3.0 for urban with 3 meaning "sometime" they had support. Ratings for financial support were very similar, 2.6 for rural and 2.5 for urban (between never and once). Support for parenting (children), was significantly higher for urban parents, with 2.6 for rural (between once and sometime) and 3.7 for urban parents (between sometime and often). The instrumental support factor indicates specific help such as transportation. Rural was 2.4 and urban was 2.6 (between once and sometime). Agency support means help with advocacy or agency hassles. Rural support was 4.4 (between often and quite often) compared to 2.3 for urban mothers.

Education and special needs.

Mothers. Nonrural mothers had more education that the rural participants. For example, 19.2% of nonrural and 15.4% of rural participants had a GED and 32.8% compared to 29.4% had a high school diploma. Almost 29% versus 30% had some high school and 8.9% of nonrural versus 15.4% of rural had less than a ninth grade education. About 10% of nonrural and 8.8% of rural women had some college education.

A total of 194 participants responded to questions about their own educational experiences. Of that total, 19% said they had received special education services as a student. Seventeen percent of the metropolitan residents had received these services compared to 21.2% of the rural residents.

Children. Two hundred thirty-eight participants responded to questions about their children's educational status. Of that total 60.9% said their children were receiving or had received special education services. The majority of the urban families (83%) and a minority of the rural families (40%) reported at least one child in the family was receiving special education services.

Home - School relationship.

Mothers were asked about their involvement with their children's teachers and schools. Fifty-three percent reported that they called the teachers in their children's schools. Fifty-five percent of metro and 51.5% of rural participants said they called teachers. On the other hand, only 36.5% of the total had written a note to their child's teacher. Seventy-three percent of urban and 54% of rural mothers reported writing notes to school. A majority of nonrural parents (54%) visited their children's school and 48% of rural parents reported visiting school. The majority of both urban and rural parent said they did not attend parent events (45% urban compared to 40% rural) and most do not get involved in committee work or other school activities (79% urban versus 84% rural). All families reported that transportation and child care were not major issues and they believed that the school was not biased against them or their children.

Only 4% of urban and 1.5% of rural parents said they did not understand the language of documents sent home from school. However, 3.1% of urban and 39.7% of rural mothers reported being uncomfortable around their children's teachers.

DISCUSSION

This study examined demographic factors, maternal and child educational experiences and history, and social support factors of 265 low-income women in 4 states. Rural versus nonrural comparisons were made. This study overcomes the limitations of other studies regarding parent involvement because income status is not a confounding variable (Sontag & Schacht, 1994).

The results of this study show some of the expected differentiation among rural versus urban mothers on AFDC. Rural poor women were more likely to be married or divorced while the majority of the urban women in the study were never married. Almost twice as many rural women had families of 4 or more and 30% of the urban women and 16% of the rural women had only one child. Rural women reported receiving AFDC longer that urban women. The number of children and the length of time on AFDC may be related to the age of the participants. Urban women had completed more education and were employed at a slightly lower rate than the rural women in the study. For the most part, these results are similar to those of other investigations of low-income families and AFDC recipients. However, these comparisons demonstrate that there are clear differences in the demographics of rural and nonrural mothers receiving AFDC. These differences should be taken into account when developing policy and programs.

There has been a lot of information about the need and lack of social support for economically poor families and families with children who have special needs (Hanson & Carta, 1996; Sontag & Schact, 1996). Little has been written about the differences in social support needs between urban and rural families. This study helps confirm the lack of support in general for low-income mothers. Rural mothers felt a little more emotional and financial support, but the averages were for both rural and urban mothers for emotional support was around 3 (sometime) and financial was between once and sometime for both urban and rural mothers. It should be recognized that these scores are very low, especially considering the need for emotional and financial support by low-income, single mothers.

Having someone to talk to, someone to help them deal with agencies, and someone to help babysit or talk with their children are all important avenues of social support that seem to be lacking by the mothers in this study. These were some significant urban - rural differences. Support regarding their children was much higher for urban mothers, with the score being close to 4 (often). On the other hand, rural mothers felt much more support (4.4 versus 2.3) support in dealing with agencies and finding advocacy for themselves and their children.

Mothers in the study felt positive about the schools their children attended and reported feeling that the school was not "against me or my child". However, neither rural nor urban parents were involved with school activities or committees and the majority did not attend parent events. A majority of the rural mothers and a minority of the urban mothers reported visiting the school but both groups called their children's teachers. A majority of the mothers did not write notes to the school or teacher, however, twice as many rural mothers wrote notes. Unlike the results of other studies, these mothers reported that it was not transportation, child care, language or school attitude that kept them from getting involved in school. Over 90% of urban and 60% of rural parents said they were not comfortable around teachers and over 95% of both groups reported they were not interested in getting involved.

These reports of the interactions between teachers and parents may reflect the above normal percent of the population that had received special services as children (19%) and whose children were receiving special services (60.9%). This last figure is startlingly high and demonstrates the concern expressed earlier about the relationship of poverty and need for special services.

The most important outcomes of this study that relate to special education personnel are: (a) economically poor mothers have a positive attitude about school and are willing to call the teacher, write notes, and visit the school. However they do not get involved in activities or attend events and this may be because of their discomfort with teachers and their lack of social support rather than because of attitudes toward education, teachers, and schools. They report that transportation and child care are not inhibiting factors for their involvement; (b) poor families may have greater demands because they have more children in special education. Even if they are satisfied with the services their children receive, the stress and pressures of poverty are added to those of having children with special needs. These factors may

prevent school involvement; (c) lack of social support is a big factor in the lives of poor women. Over 50% of both groups reported that they never had help with child care or had had help once. Over 25% of both groups reported never or only once having someone to talk to about their worries. The most support that both groups had was in having "someone to relax or joke with". Schools who aim to involve parents in their children's education and teachers who want to be supportive of parents of their students need to consider the lack of support to be a major barrier for parents. Maybe for some families, being supporting and accepting is a major contribution to the well-being of the family.

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